

# The Farthest Shores of Propaganda

by Stephen Cox

Two films from Hollywood's Golden Age tested the limits of how much explicit political programming popular art can withstand.

If you're looking for propaganda, you'll find an inexhaustible supply in American films.

Hollywood is a place where even a history of the Mormon church can wind up as political propaganda — leftwing propaganda, at that. In *"Brigham Young — Frontiersman"* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940), Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, impersonated by Vincent Price(!), is asked what his religion is all about. Well, he says, with C.B. DeMillish music playing in the background, it's about building a world that has "a brotherhood plan," a plan that makes it "impossible for any one man to pile up a lotta goods or have power over his neighbors." He likens his version of the New Jerusalem to "that anthill over there," announcing that in the human anthill "everybody [will be] doing his share of the work and getting his part of the profits." Thus summarized, Mormon theology comes much closer to Marx ("from each according to his ability, to each according to his need") than anyone might have predicted.

With respect to political ideas, Hollywood films have proven remarkably absorbent. But rather than multiplying examples of the "Brigham Young" kind, it may be interesting to identify the limits of absorbency, the boundaries of entertainment propaganda in America. How far has propaganda been able to go?

The boundaries are identified, I believe, by a pair of movies, *"Gabriel Over the White House"* (1933), the most overtly fascist film ever released by a major studio; and *"Mission to Moscow"* (1943), the most overtly communist film. This is not a scientific determination, but I think you'll agree that it's hard to imagine more extreme ideological statements ever issuing from Hollywood.

## President Hammond

*"Gabriel Over the White House"* was the work of Cosmopolitan Productions, an affiliate of MGM. It was released early in the month after Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated as president. It was produced by Walter Wanger, who was involved, during his career, with such exceptionally varied films as *"The Sheik"* (1921), *"Invasion of the Body Snatchers"* (1956), and the Marx Brothers' *"Cocoanuts"* (1929). *"Gabriel"* was directed by Gregory LaCava, a specialist in comic films

who would achieve his greatest success in "My Man Godfrey" (1936). The screenplay was written by Carey Wilson, who received writing credits for "Ben-Hur" (1925) and "Mutiny on the Bounty" (1935). It was a respectable Hollywood crew.

"Gabriel" tells the story of Jud Hammond (intelligently played by Walter Huston), a crass and mildly corrupt president of the United States. At his inaugural party he enjoys

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witticisms about having purchased his office with promises he doesn't intend to keep. After his high-class guests have left the White House, he welcomes to its hallowed halls a young woman who is very obviously his mistress. But Hammond has worse moral failings. The nation suffers from a catastrophic depression; "starvation and want is everywhere"; yet Hammond remains undisturbed. While an "army of the unemployed" (shades of the Bonus Army of 1932) marches on Washington, demanding that the government "provide work for everybody," he diverts himself by driving recklessly along the public roads.

Fortunately for the republic, the president's car goes off the road, and he suffers "a concussion of the brain." He is, for all intents and purposes, dead. Then a miracle occurs. He is revived by a supernatural force — the archangel Gabriel. This supernatural being is never seen, except in a sketch that provides the backdrop for the opening credits. But his presence is known by the rustling of White House curtains, a theme from the fourth movement of Brahms' first symphony, and the good deeds that Hammond proceeds to do.

Instead of hiding in the White House, Hammond meets the million-man march of the unemployed in Baltimore, where the protesters are trying, in the words of their leader, "to arouse the stupid lazy people of the United States to force their government to do something before everybody slowly starves to death." Without waiting on the "stupid lazy people," Hammond decrees that the army of the unemployed will become an "army of construction," working for the government and "subject to military discipline," until, "stimulated by these efforts," the civilian economy revives. That takes care of the unemployment problem.

Hammond's next move is to visit Congress and demand money "to restore buying power, stimulate purchases, restore prosperity." (Then as now, "stimulus" was a crucial concept.) He further demands that Congress declare a state of emergency, then adjourn, while he "assume[s] full responsibility for the government."

"Mr. President!" a senator cries. "This is dictatorship!" "Words do not frighten me," he responds. "If what I plan to do in the name of the people makes me a dictator, then it is a dictatorship based on Jefferson's definition of democracy, a government for the greatest good of the greatest number. If

Congress refuses to adjourn, I think, gentlemen, you forget that I am still the president of these United States, and as commander-in-chief of the army and navy, it is within the rights of the president to declare the country under martial law!" Having provided this unique exegesis of the Constitution, he strides off indignantly.

Of course, anyone with a copy of "Familiar Quotations" can find that Jefferson didn't define democracy in that way. Hammond's words about the "greatest good" are cribbed, more or less, from Thomas Hutcheson and Jeremy Bentham — and the original context was not a consideration of "democracy." Also, anyone who bothers to read the Constitution will discover that presidents are granted no right to impose martial law whenever there's an economic crisis. But the American people must be "stupid" and "lazy," at least about reading and thinking, because the next thing you see on the screen is the front page of the Washington Herald: "Congress Accedes to President's Request: Adjourns by Overwhelming Vote — Hammond Dictator."

With his new authority, Hammond promulgates laws to prevent the foreclosure of mortgages; laws providing direct aid to agriculture; and laws, or regulations, or something, that will allow the United States to abandon Prohibition without waiting, as Roosevelt did, for a constitutional amendment. Hammond's motive for repeal is far from libertarian; what he desires isn't freedom but "a return to law and order." He plans to get rid of bootleggers by establishing government liquor stores to monopolize the trade.

Much is made of gangsters, their antipathy to the state, and their antipathy, for some reason, to the unemployed. Hammond therefore creates a federal police force to arrest them, try them at court martial, and execute them. The chief arresting officer serves as judge, and the executions are conducted with the Statue of Liberty in the background: liberty equals obeying the law. "We have in the White House," it is said, "a man who has enabled us to cut the red tape of legal procedures and get back to first principles — an eye for an eye . . ."

The audience is meant to understand that these methods restore the United States to prosperity. But what about the rest of the world? Acting under the continued inspiration of Gabriel, Hammond sets things to rights in that department, too.

An international conference is scheduled to meet at Washington to discuss the war debts owed by European nations to the United States — an enormous issue in 1933. (For a protolibertarian perspective on the issue, see the entry for Garrett in "Works Cited.") The debts, clearly, are not being paid. Each nation pleads its inability to pay.

Hammond's solution is for all of them to give him the money they would otherwise spend on armaments. Then no one will owe anything, and there will be universal peace. To convince foreign diplomats that an arms race is futile, he stages a demonstration in which American dive bombers blast a pair of battleships into oblivion. This, clearly, is what will happen to the other nations' navies if they don't agree to give them up. It's for their own good: "The next war will depopulate the earth. Invisible poison gases, inconceivably devastating explosives, annihilating death rays, will sweep [the world] to utter destruction." Besides, if they don't agree to

disarmament, he's prepared "to force peace" on them.

So they agree. When it comes Hammond's turn to sign the Washington disarmament covenant on behalf of the United States, he uses the pen with which Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. It's the acme of his career as dictator.

But alas! Gabriel will flutter no more. Hammond collapses while signing the covenant. He dies amid a shocked and (for some reason) respectful throng of diplomats, who apparently agree with the sentiment of his (former) mistress: "He's proved himself one of the greatest men who ever lived."

Thus the tale endeth. "Gabriel Over the White House" is a fantasy of fascism-without-the-costs. The way to gain peace and prosperity, it asserts, is to seize dictatorial power; nothing but good can come of that. This is perfectly constitutional and thus, again, without costs. That removes some of the drama, but for the sake of pure propaganda, it's all to the good. Propaganda is based on self-righteousness: it always finds ways to assume — never to prove — the rightness of its cause.

### Comrade Stalin

"Mission to Moscow" had a harder task. It set out to show the rightness, not of a fantasy American dictatorship, but of an actual foreign dictatorship, heartily disliked by most Americans. "Mission to Moscow" is America's most fervent mass-market propaganda for the Stalinist utopia.

The film was released by Warner Brothers in May 1943. The final result of the Nazi-Soviet contest on the Eastern Front was no longer in doubt, but generating American support for the Soviet Union was still regarded as vitally important by some people, especially politicians who feared that Russia would make a separate peace with Germany. The possibility of Stalin's trying the same stunt *twice* — first in 1939, in the Hitler-Stalin Pact, then in 1943 — should have shocked the conscience of anyone whose conscience hadn't died several years before. One person whom it grieved but did not shock was Joseph E. Davies, who had served from 1936 to 1938 as America's ambassador to the Soviet Union. Davies sponsored "Mission to Moscow" as a means of increasing American support for the Soviets and of keeping Stalin among the allies (MacLean 72–73, 90–91). The movie was derived, in one way or another, from Davies' book of the same name (1941), an account of his experiences in Russia.

Like "Gabriel Over the White House," the film had a respectable Hollywood pedigree. It was produced by Robert Buckner, who had written the screenplay for "Knut Rockne, All-American" (1940), and directed by Michael Curtiz, whose credits include "Casablanca" (1942), "Yankee Doodle Dandy" (1942), and other classic films. The screenplay was written by Howard Koch, who shared script credit for "Casablanca." But "Mission to Moscow" is a very odd piece of work.

To make the film more personal, and more official, Davies insisted on appearing as himself in a long prefatory scene. Blinking furiously into the camera, Davies lectures the audience about his "reliability" as a guide to Soviet politics. (Here and later, I quote from the film itself, not from the shooting script that appears, with some differences from the final result, in Culbert [57–224].) His evidence? His ancestors were "pioneers"; he was "educated in the public schools"; he was

taught Christianity by his "sainted mother" (an evangelical preacher); he believes in the "free enterprise" system. After burning this incense on the altar of Americanism, Davies intones, "While in Russia, I came to have a very high respect for the integrity and the honesty of the Soviet leaders" and for their sincere devotion to "world peace." He adds that these honest leaders respected his honesty, too. Obviously, the audience should follow suit.

After Davies' pompous overture, the credits are shown and the real movie starts. Davies is played by Walter Huston, the same Walter Huston who had starred in "Gabriel Over the White House." He proves himself just as effective at portraying a communist dupe as he was at portraying a fascist dictator. In his first scene, he announces the movie's ruling idea: "No leaders of a nation have been so misrepresented and misunderstood as those in the Soviet government."

Skeptical viewers may wonder about that claim. They may also wonder how the little Christian boy from heartland America came to worship at the temple of the commissars. According to the film, it happened in this way: Davies was rowing a boat to his family's vacation camp in the Adirondacks when he was summoned to the White House to confer with his old friend FDR. The president asked him to go to Russia to get "the hard boiled facts" — as if Davies had some special talent as a researcher, or Roosevelt lacked the ability to read the reports already available.

Be that as it may, Davies takes the job and travels to Russia via Germany. At the train station in Hamburg he sees young people in uniform, marching past — the Hitler Youth. "Look at those little wooden soldiers," says Mrs. Davies. "It's as if they'd all been stamped out of the same machine." A glowering Davies shares his wife's outrage over the Nazis' destruction of individualism. But his next stop is the Soviet Union, where he is greeted by other squads of uniformed young people. "My, what fine-looking soldiers!" he says.

Equally fine-looking is the gourmet cuisine that materializes as soon as one crosses the Russian border. It's "real food," and plenty of it! — despite what the anticommunists say about millions of people being starved to death by Stalin, and despite what Davies' own book says about the dangers of eating in Russia: "British Embassy safest. French next. All the

rest questionable as they depend on local products. No wonder that the [American] staff here have their own commissary for supplies" (Davies 19).

From here on, the film is organized as a checklist of arguments against critics of Stalinism. We quickly learn that, contrary to their public image in the West, Soviet leaders are merely unpretentious civil servants. Yet they are also deep thinkers. Meeting A.J. Vyshinsky, Stalin's chief prosecutor, Davies burbles, "Ah yes, yes, we've heard of your great legal work, even in America." Yup, when Americans think of justice, the name Vyshinsky naturally comes to mind.

Some anticommunists assert that tyrants like Stalin couldn't possibly have the people's support. But their support is amply proved by stock footage of crowds marching across Red Square during the May Day parade. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything in the world!" says the irrepressible Mrs. Davies. As for the "peace" crowd — some people might be disturbed by Stalin's lavish display of armaments, but Davies takes the opportunity to thank God that Russia is "one European nation with no aggressive intentions."

It gets better. The Soviet people, we learn, possess the luxuries of life as well as its necessities. Mrs. Davies visits a posh cosmetics shop, personally supervised by Mme. Molotov (the same hard-bitten Stalinist who was later packed off to a concentration camp because she was a Jew, with Jewish friends, yet refused to relinquish her Stalinism). Mrs. Davies: "Women are much the same the world over. They all want to please their men!" Mme. Molotov: "I think we have much in common, Mrs. Davies."

Another thing that Americans and Russians have in common is the moral foundation of their governments. According to one of the film's many friendly Russian citizens, the Soviets' aim is simply "the greatest good for the greatest number of people" — the same idea that the fascist President Hammond falsely attributed to Jefferson. "Not a bad principle," says Davies. "We believe in it too."

But isn't Russia a "police state"? The American ambassador isn't worried — and why should he be? The secret police watch the Davies family from a car parked in plain sight, five feet away, as if they were auditioning for parts in "Naked

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Gun." Who could fret about bumbling like that? The serious role of detective is reserved for Davies himself. He tours the Soviet Union, trying to discover just how enormous its success really is. His findings come as "a revelation" to him: the victory of socialism is much greater than he could ever have imagined!

He notices only one problem. There are just too many industrial accidents in the Soviet Union. Since they couldn't possibly result from any problems inherent in a socialist industrial system, they could only result from sabotage. But

fortunately, the government is one step ahead of its enemies. It understands that leading figures of the Soviet Union have been allied for years with Germany, Japan, and the dreaded Leon Trotsky, in an attempt to overthrow the workers' state. The film follows the inexorable process of socialist justice as the traitors are seized, tried, and convicted by *their own confessions*.

Davies attends one of the "purge" trials (constructed out of "damning testimony" drawn from several such proceedings) and declares himself highly satisfied: "Based on 20 years of trial practice, I'd be inclined to believe these confessions. . . . 'Mein Kampf' is being put into practice" (by Trotsky, a Jew). Davies knows better than to think that confessions could ever be *extorted* in the Soviet system of justice.

Now the movie needs to grapple with the most obvious argument against the Soviet regime: it was Stalin, not Trotsky, who forged a pact with the Nazis in 1939. This complaint can only be answered by the testimony of Stalin himself. So, at the very end of his pilgrimage to Russia, Davies achieves an audience with Stalin, who imparts his deepest wisdom about the international situation. "The present governments of England and France do not represent the people," he confides. "The reactionary elements in England have determined upon a deliberate policy of making Germany strong. . . . There is no doubt that their plan is to force Hitler into a war" with Russia. If the Western powers don't befriend the Soviet Union, then the Soviet Union may have to befriend . . . Hitler ("protect ourselves in another way")! Stalin speaks, and Davies "appreciate[s]" his "frankness." He sees how logical the communist leader's ideas are.

In 1947, Jack Warner, who authorized "Mission to Moscow," told the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities that the film was made to help the war effort (Culbert 266). If that was the primary motive, how can we explain its blaming the war on one of America's allies (England) in order to exculpate another (Russia), which had started the war by concluding an alliance with Hitler? Even such absurdly pro-Soviet films as "Song of Russia" (MGM, 1944) never went that far. "Mission to Moscow" isn't about the war; it's about Stalin, and about justifying him at every step.

That's what it shows Davies himself doing. Inspired by his edifying conversation with Stalin, he returns to the United States, where he tries to combat American isolationism. Then, following Hitler's invasion of Russia, he travels about America, drumming up enthusiasm for the Soviets. He links opposition to the Soviet Union with "fascist propagandists" and paid agents of "the Axis," and he links all of them to "defeatists" and "isolationists" and opponents of conscription. He never mentions the fact that from 1939 to 1941, while Hitler was allied with Stalin, the American friends of Stalin were vociferous isolationists. When a wild-eyed man, obviously a lunatic, rises in Davies' audience to ask him about the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Davies explains that Stalin had to buy time, because "he was left standing alone" — another attack on England for not allying itself with him. A second man has the temerity to bring up Russia's invasion of "poor little Finland" in 1939 — but Davies immediately provides the facts: the invasion was Finland's own fault!

Nothing can surpass the unintentional comedy of these

scenes; nothing, perhaps, except the vision with which the film concludes, a vision of permanent solidarity among all participants in "this, the people's war" — all the people, especially the Soviets, who are dedicated to "rebuilding a free world." It's a scene from the kitschiest kind of religious literature: as the peoples of the world trudge slowly toward the skyscrapers of the New Jerusalem, an invisible choir sings, "You are, yes you are! You are your brother's keeper! Now and forever, you are!" Thus the sarcastic remark of Cain, the primal murderer, becomes the final argument for friendship with Stalin.

### Evolution of an Archangel

No one who watches "Mission to Moscow" can keep from exclaiming, "How could this movie ever have been produced?" But first things first. Let's consider how "Gabriel Over the White House" could ever have been produced.

"Gabriel" originated with a media tycoon, an ambitious producer, and an oddball book. The book was "Gabriel Over the White House: A Novel of the Presidency," published anonymously by one Thomas F. Tweed, a political associate of David Lloyd George, former Liberal prime minister of Great Britain. Lloyd George, to whom the book pays tribute (Tweed 226–27), has often been accused of softness on fascism.

Enter Walter Wanger, with aspirations to advance himself in the film industry. In January 1933, shortly before Tweed's novel was published, he induced MGM to buy film rights to the work. His goal, it seems, was to secure the backing of William Randolph Hearst, owner of Cosmopolitan Films and a friend of Lloyd George. The goal was realized: a screenplay was rapidly written, and Hearst rapidly came on board. He also tinkered with the script. To him is attributed the bullying disarmament speech that President Hammond makes to the other statesmen. This posed no problem for Wanger. He was happy to go along (McConnell 10–12, 19; Bernstein 82–84).

The fascism of "Gabriel" came primarily from the book on which it was based, and secondarily from its backer, Mr. Hearst. The director and screenwriter functioned as employees, doing their jobs. Wanger is another matter; he was the film's entrepreneur. His biographer is short on analysis and long on details (not all of them accurately reported: he thinks that "Gabriel" is "set in the 1980s" rather than the late 1930s, which is the actual period [Bernstein 82, Tweed 12]); but he

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demonstrates that Wanger's political expressions fluctuated like a fever chart. He supported communist causes; he supported American capitalism; he opposed war; he glorified war; he was praised by communists; he was successfully buttered up by Mussolini. His highs and lows were centered on a constant, naive modern liberalism, the type of "thought" that allowed him to bring "Gabriel" to life without ever worrying that it might be a fascist film. The biographer reports Wanger's

boast that "the film anticipated many of Roosevelt's innovative policies (such as the Works Progress Administration for the unemployed) and his use of radio for fireside chats" (Bernstein 130, 127, 87). The difference is that Roosevelt didn't make himself a dictator. Wanger's hero did.

Louis B. Mayer, operating head of MGM, reportedly wanted to pull the plug on "Gabriel," thinking that the obtuse president whom one sees in its first scenes was a satire on

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his friend Herbert Hoover (McConnell 8–9). Supposing that's true, it had no apparent influence on the finished film. Yet while "Gabriel" was in the works, considerable anxiety was shown by the Hays Office, the film industry's self-censorship organization. It was worried that the movie made American institutions look bad and might even encourage revolutionary sentiments (Bernstein 84–86).

FDR chimed in too. Through his aide, Stephen Early, he suggested last-minute changes, which were made. As a result, the army of the unemployed doesn't appear in Washington, as planned — Baltimore is as far as it gets — and Hammond threatens the foreign leaders on a "private yacht," not a Navy vessel (Nasaw 465–66; what you see on the screen, however, is still unmistakably a Navy ship). Around the time when the movie was released, Tweed's publisher claimed that the novel "anticipated everything [Roosevelt] has done!" (advertisement, New York Times, April 4, 1933). It didn't, and Roosevelt didn't even like the movie. Trying to maintain Hearst's political support, he sent him a backhanded letter of congratulation, saying he was "pleased . . . with the changes" and complimenting the film as "an intensely interesting picture [that] should do much to help [what, exactly?]." He reported that his friends considered "Gabriel" a "most unusual picture" (Nasaw 466, emphasis added).

But the major changes weren't instigated by Roosevelt. They had already happened, during the transition from book to movie. "Gabriel," the novel, is actually more fascist, and more interesting, than "Gabriel," the film.

In the book, Hammond's various programs to stimulate "consumption" result in a "huge national debt" and the "mortgaging [of] future assets," but for him the real problem is "the existing capitalist system. . . . A system which permits humanity to be crushed and starved because of over-production." He admits that he doesn't know how to destroy capitalism — right now, anyway (Tweed 129–31, 219–20). He can, however, keep his own system going, and get other nations involved in it too, by arranging disarmament. Hence his actions at the great international conclave, where the book introduces a dotty bit of Wilsonian liberalism. Instead of threatening the diplomats with American air power, as he does in the movie, Hammond argues them into backing his peace scheme by offering to cancel their war debts, internationalize America's

gold reserve, and create a world currency that will eliminate barriers to trade.

In other respects, however, the film represents a decided liberalization of the book. It presents a solemn, Lincolnesque president, not the grim, angry man who in Tweed's novel gets his way by sending an army of gun-toting brownshirts, the unemployed marchers-on-Washington, to threaten members of Congress until they are glad to surrender power to him. The cinematic Hammond urges people to read the Constitution and discover how many powers it purportedly gives him; the novelistic president informs the nation that no "mere document, no matter how sacred," can "bind the hands and shackle the rights of [the] people" — meaning him. He openly violates the Constitution (Tweed 121).

The novel's fictional narrator, a crony of Hammond, adopts a tone worthy of Goebbels' diaries, admiring his leader's clever means of consolidating power: packing the Supreme Court; using federal money to bribe the states into dismissing their legislatures and substituting executive "councils" approved by him; placing gauleiters in every state — "fiscal agents" whose power "surpass[es] that of even the Governor"; combining all police forces into a single national force, operated by himself; creating a nationwide investigation and surveillance agency; confiscating all privately owned guns; dispatching people who fail to surrender their guns to "convict labour battalions"; sending those who resist arrest to "a special concentration camp" on Ellis Island, where 90% of them are shot (Tweed 153, 186–87).

To create popular support for his policies, Hammond invents a Department of Education, which is actually a department of propaganda, and mesmerizes the populace with long television speeches. (Strangely, the impoverished people of America have so much spending power that when TV goes on the market, two-thirds of them buy it, despite the fact that it costs "under \$100" — in today's money, \$1,500 [Tweed 80].) The Secretary of Education is a national socialist idealist who tells a friend, "Good God, the more I see of that man [Hammond] the more I want to be his doormat" (Tweed 119). Hitler could demand no more.

The oddest, but most revealing, feature of Tweed's story is its conclusion. Hammond discovered his great political ideas after being knocked on the head in an auto accident; now he suffers another knock on the head and forgets them all. When he finds out what he's been doing for the past four years, he's horrified at his betrayal of "liberty" and "the spirit of individ-

ualism." He tries to announce this in a television speech, but his fascist associates in the White House shut off the broadcasting equipment. Enraged by their betrayal, he suffers a heart attack, and they calmly let him die. One of these helpful friends suggests that during Hammond's four years of political heroism "he had not been normal . . . He had been on the borderline of insanity" (Tweed 286, 271). The reader is expected to agree. Yet he is also expected to agree that it was a good idea for Hammond's friends to kill him, once he'd regained his common sense.

None of this interesting material gets into the movie. The film version of "Gabriel Over the White House" is a ridiculous example of extremist propaganda, but it is also an example of the moderating influence that Hollywood professionals and even Washington politicians can have in the shaping of propaganda for the mass audience they want to attract. No one involved in the movie held out for the purity of the original tale. Hearst groused about the small and late changes suggested by the White House, but he acquiesced. The others appear to have known, instinctively, what they had to do at each stage of the movie's production. The bland will find a way.

### "Brainwashed"

"Mission to Moscow" developed in the opposite direction, from a drab book to a strident movie.

Joseph E. Davies, author of "Mission to Moscow," the book, was a midwestern lawyer who became active in politics and was rewarded with a third-class job in the Wilson administration. In this capacity he became friends with Franklin Roosevelt, who two decades later appointed him ambassador to the Soviet Union. By that time, Davies was married to the richest woman in the United States, Marjorie Post Hutton, leftwing daughter of C.W. Post, the cereal king. In "Mission to Moscow," the movie, we hear of their summer camp. This "camp" was Mrs. Davies' baronial estate, "an island kingdom, self-sufficient like a fief of feudal days" (Koch 111). During Davies' trips to Europe he depended on the services of Marjorie's 357-foot yacht, the "Sea Cloud," which carried a crew of 69 and featured a hospital, a gymnasium, and, of course, a movie theater (MacLean 22, 42). He never realized that his marriage was the only interesting thing about him.

Robert Buckner, producer of "Mission to Moscow," remembered Davies in the way that most people did, as an ignorant windbag and self-advertiser: "He was a pompous, conceited, arrogant man with greater political ambitions than his abilities justified . . . Stalin brainwashed him completely" (Culbert 254). Buckner's opinion was shared by virtually everyone in the Moscow embassy. "Ambassador Davies," said one of his colleagues, "was not noted for an acute understanding of the Soviet system, and he had an unfortunate tendency to take what was presented at the [Bukharin-Rykov purge] trial as the honest and gospel truth" (Bohlen 51). Another colleague, the famous George Kennan, who had the job of translating for Davies, remembered his naive trust in his own opinions, which were mainly those impressed upon him by his Soviet hosts (Kennan 83).

After his return from Russia, Davies put together an account of his experiences, the literary "Mission to Moscow" — a *mélange* of letters, journal entries, and bureaucratic reports,

650 pages long, a tome almost as engaging as the phone book, but much less reliable. Only researchers as hapless as the current writer could have made their way through this book. Yet it became a bestseller, probably for the same reason that presidential memoirs, which have the same characteristics, become bestsellers: it was topical, and people imagined it would give them some kind of special wisdom — only to read a few pages and discover their mistake.

Roosevelt may have suggested that Davies' book be turned into a movie; much more likely, the bumptious Davies may have suggested the idea to Roosevelt. Anyway, Warner Brothers thought "Mission to Moscow" was a good property. Davies, unlike virtually every other writer in Hollywood history, was given a contract granting him "approval" of "the basic story" (Culbert 15–17).

According to Buckner, Davies used his power to make sure that the movie whitewashed the Moscow purge trials. Buckner claimed that "an ambiguity about the guilt or innocence had been purposely suggested by Davies when the script was being written, but when time came to shoot the scene . . . Davies insisted on the guilt." When Buckner protested, he says, Davies threatened to pay off the studio and produce the film himself, using his wife's enormous reserves of money; and Warner Brothers backed down (Culbert 253).

A man like Davies was bound to make a fool of himself, perhaps in exactly that way. Nevertheless, Buckner's recollection, written in 1978, is decidedly untrustworthy. On May 20, 1943, soon after the film was released, Buckner wrote to Jack Warner, "I have carefully read all the criticisms [of the movie] and most of those boys are wide open on nearly every point. But at least we flushed out the Red baiters and the Fascist element in the press" (Culbert 253, 33). Is this the person who objected so sternly to Davies' Stalinist interpretation of history?

And was there ambiguity in the script before Davies' intervention? It doesn't appear in the available records. The first draft of the script, written by Erskine Caldwell, confirmed the wildest fantasies of the purge trials by showing Trotsky conspiring directly with Hitler to subvert the Soviet Union. Howard Koch's script exchanged Hitler for the marginally more believable Ribbentrop, Hitler's foreign minister, but left it perfectly clear that the Stalinists were right to purge the "Trotskyist" subversives (Culbert 162–64, 237). The Caldwell-Koch Nazi scene was finally dropped, which may be evidence that somebody, probably Buckner, was disgusted by this extremity of Stalinism. But it is hardly evidence that the screenplay was ambiguous about the conspirators' guilt. That is nonsense. Nothing went into the movie, or stayed in it, that Davies didn't allow, whether he really wanted it or not; but he didn't write the script, which is of a different character from Davies' book.

True, almost every segment of Davies' book sums up favorably for the Soviets. Marveling, for example, at the fact that so many people convicted of offenses against the state were men of "recognized distinction" and "long-continued loyalty," Davies concludes that the *evidence* against them must have been powerful indeed (Davies 201). To which one may reply, What evidence? When Davies can't twist logic, he resorts to mere cold-bloodedness. Footnoting the work of Commissar for Heavy Industry V.I. Mezhlauk, a man he

admired, Davies adds: "Note: Mezhlauk has recently been 'liquidated' — whereabouts unknown" (Davies 385). No critique of Stalin is implied.

Yet one could produce a whole book against the Soviet system, and a large book at that, merely by quoting Davies' accounts of purges, executions, labor abuses, famines, and the communists' early meditations on the usefulness of a deal

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*To create popular support for his policies,  
Hammond invents a Department of Education,  
which is actually a department of propaganda.*

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with Hitler. In Davies' text, the Soviet Union is a "totalitarian" state; trial confessions are "bizarre"; and "hundreds of thousands of people" are said, on good authority, to have died in the "horrors" of an agricultural "strike" that was "broke[n]" by the government (Davies 486, 405, 179). None of these "ambiguities" appears in the movie script — though, supposedly, it was "Davies' brilliant, legalistic fact-finding" which convinced the scriptwriter that nothing about the Soviet Union needed to be "whitewashed" (New York Times, June 13, 1943). What's the explanation?

David Culbert, the best commentator on this film, brings up two questions: "Was 'Mission to Moscow' a Stalinist tract? If so, did this mean that there were communists in Hollywood?" He easily establishes the answer to the first one: Yes. But he's still baffled by the movie's extremism. He blames it on the assumption that "entertainment programming should contain social 'messages,' the stronger the better." He blames it on government officials — Roosevelt, Davies — who sponsored the film, thinking it would help to win the war. Still, he observes, "this film is not within reason" (Culbert 13, 39). He can't account for its *degree* of extremism.

But that's easy enough. Communists did exist in Hollywood, and Howard Koch, the principal writer of "Mission to Moscow" was one of them.

Several years after "Mission to Moscow," Koch was temporarily "blacklisted" by the studios, receiving a crown of martyrdom that he wore with pride for the remainder of his long life. Did he deserve it? That is, was he martyred in the original, early Christian meaning of that word — punished as a witness, in this case a communist witness, to his own beliefs?

The answer is yes — on Koch's own testimony.

### The Double View

Koch published the story of his life, "As Time Goes By," in 1979. It has often been used as a basic source for movie history. When reading it, however, one notices odd things. Normal questions go unanswered; narratives that begin in a credible way develop some exaggerated, virtually incredible feature, even when they have nothing to do with politics. And on that subject, Koch uses a variety of tricks both to conceal and to reveal his true identity.

He asserts that he was reluctant to write "Mission to

Moscow" — because he was tired and needed a vacation, not because he was averse to Stalinism. Indeed, no one, including Koch, ever alleged that he had any intellectual or moral scruples about "Mission to Moscow." Late in the game, a functionary of the government's Office of War Information, which was enthusiastic about the film, suggested that it include a defense of the Hitler-Stalin Pact (Bennett 498); but the defense was very probably in the script already, and Koch never blamed its presence on the government.

Jack and Harry Warner, he says, overcame his objections to the job by insisting that it was his patriotic duty, and he started writing a script from scratch, not really knowing what to do. Happily, though, "the opening sequence . . . emerged full-blown" while he was riding a train through Needles, California (Koch 106).

That's the story. No one seems to have noticed that it ignores one fact: the opening had already been laid out by Erskine Caldwell, before he was fired because of his clumsy dialogue (Culbert 18 reports this fact but draws no conclusions about Koch's veracity). Koch supposedly didn't want to do the film, but he was determined to take full credit for it.

Koch describes at great length his visit to the Davies' summer "camp" to discuss the movie. Strangely, he neglects to mention the fact that Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Ambassador,

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*Robert Buckner, producer of "Mission to Moscow," remembered Davies in the way that most people did, as an ignorant windbag.*

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was also present, for the same reason. That seems to have made no impression on him (Koch 109–16, Maclean 92, Culbert 20, 25, 253–55). One person he does mention is his friend Jay Leyda. He insisted that the studio hire Leyda as a special "technical adviser." He suggests that Leyda, who had spent several years in the Soviet Union, worked only on surface details, not on substantial matters (Koch 116–17, 123–24). Subsequent research has shown that Leyda was a Stalinist who probably had significant influence on the film (Radosh 8–10).

About the purge trials, and the question of the defendants' guilt, Koch writes, "I doubt if we will ever be certain of the answer, which is buried in the hearts of dead men." After all the years between 1943 and 1979, the defendants' preposterous confessions still look to him "like admissions of guilt for which they were sincerely penitent" (Koch 130). In 1943, of course, he knew even less about Russia than he does now, because "the American news media were almost without exception anti-Soviet, so their reporting could hardly be considered objective" (Koch 130, 98). Substitute "Nazi" for "Soviet," and you'll see the fallacy: if you oppose something, you're not being objective, so long as that something is Stalinism.

But if Koch was as naive about politics as he suggests, how did he happen to sign up for so many political causes? One cause he is proud to mention is the Waldorf Peace Conference

(1949), an attempt to mobilize intellectuals in the support of Soviet foreign policy. He was an official of the sponsoring organization. He boasts that other members included "such 'subversive' characters as Albert Einstein, Harlow Shapley, Linus Pauling, Philip Morrison, Paul Robeson, and others of that eminent stature" (Koch 165, 178). That list is carefully compiled. It's enough to say that Einstein's pacifism habitually led him to temporize with communism; that Shapley, a distinguished astronomer, was a communist stooge to a hilarious degree (Hook 390–94); and that Robeson, a great singer, was a recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize. All were, indeed, "eminent."

Like other unreconstructed communists (Lillian Hellman is the best example), Koch depended on ordinary Americans' ignorance of history when he asserted his innocence about the ugly ideals he held. Yet he also courted the cognoscenti. He simultaneously targeted two audiences: (A) naive, trusting folk, whom he expected to fool; (B) cynical insiders, who shared his values and approved his sleight-of-hand.

This is the formula for a great deal of modern propaganda. One doesn't refer to fascism or Stalinism, or cite one's friendship with Goebbels or Gus Hall — though Koch comes close to that, in his praise of John Howard Lawson, the most outrageous and vulgarly abusive of the Hollywood communists, who in his view was a candidate for "sainthood" (Koch 89, Cox 92). Instead, one discusses "peace" or "social justice" or "national self-determination" and dilates on comrades of "eminent stature" in some non-political field. People in the know will penetrate the code. If others start to wonder, you can angrily demand, "Are you calling Einstein a communist?"

Koch goes farther. He enjoys flirting with detection. Speaking of his activities in the late 1940s (specific dates are rare in his book), he announces, "I must have attended a hundred or so meetings; I don't recall that the name of Stalin was ever mentioned." Could anyone, at that time, ride for an hour on a city bus without hearing the name of Stalin, much less sit in political meetings — about "peace," of all things — and never hear it? He continues: "The war was now over and his [Stalin's] role in world affairs was no longer prominent" (Koch 166). But this was precisely the period in which Koch, a supporter of the communist-front Progressive Party, was struggling against President Truman's efforts to contain . . . Joseph Stalin (Koch 165). It's all very funny — for those who get the joke.

In 1855, Lewis Cass referred to Americans who, "while humbly affecting to know nothing [are] resolutely determined to direct everything" (Klunder 271). Koch, who was constantly involved in politics but constantly denied that he knew much of anything about it, is a good example of the type. And without the authorship of someone like him, "Mission to Moscow" couldn't have come together, no matter what the White House or Joseph Davies wanted. The movie needed an author who was just "naive" enough to push the most cynical line imaginable.

### The Moral of These Stories

Is there anything of general application that one can learn from the history of "Gabriel Over the White House" and "Mission to Moscow"? I think there is.

One thing, curiously, is the truth of a cherished libertarian



conviction — a belief in the potency of ideas, particularly the ideas of creative writers. It's worth noting that many early influences on the American libertarian movement — Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, Ayn Rand, Albert Jay Nock, H. L. Mencken — were professional novelists or essayists. In a way that these people would not have appreciated, "Gabriel Over the White House" and "Mission to Moscow" show that ideas have power. Koch's communist ideas escaped the normal constraints of a capitalist studio and blazed across the screens of America. Tweed's fascist ideas found their market, though not quite in their original form. What this means, however, is that, contrary to most libertarian theory, the creative imagination is a very mixed blessing.

More cheerful thoughts are suggested by what the two films reveal about the usefulness of propaganda, especially propaganda that takes an overtly polemical form.

In America, few propaganda movies of any kind have legs *as* propaganda. "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) glorifies the Ku Klux Klan; but very few simpletons ever went to see that movie — or D.W. Griffith's next big picture, "Intolerance" (1916), which attacks Prohibition — to be instructed in political ideology. For many people, to be sure, propaganda just confirms existing biases. Movies such as "Julia" (1977) and "Reds" (1981) confirmed for the '60s generation the fond belief that emotionally troubled bourgeois leftists have their fingers on the pulse of history. This may be significant, for the persons involved, but it is of doubtful ideological importance.

It's hard to say what biases "Gabriel Over the White House" confirmed. Its themes may have appealed to the broad, yet shallow, quasi-fascist fringe of American voters, represented in that era by Huey Long and Father Coughlin; this idea has been suggested, though never documented (Carmichael 160–61, 168). The movie did make money. Cheap and easy to produce — it occupied only 11 shooting days (some authorities say 18) and cost \$210,000 — it cleared \$200,000 in profits (Bernstein 83, 86; McConnell 9). It received some bad notices and some good ones. "Variety" predicted that it wouldn't inspire anybody to think about doing anything (Carmichael 174), and it didn't. It was a symptom of its times; it was not a cause.

As for "Mission to Moscow" — it flopped. "It never broke even," the producer said. That's putting it mildly. Culbert notes that the studio tried to destroy all the prints in October 1947 (when the movie attracted unwelcome attention from the House Committee on Un-American Activities), but that made no difference. It had already finished its miserable run. It reported gross American receipts of \$945,000, after production costs of \$1,517,000 and advertising costs of \$500,000. It enjoyed a big run in Russia (Culbert 256, 31–38), where it may have disheartened good people with its fervent show of American support for Stalinism. But this is speculation.

Culbert wisely observes that "Mission to Moscow" shows the fallacy of the idea "that mass media control what we think. There is a limit to what the traffic will bear." I would say more. There is no evidence that, as Culbert asserts, pro-Soviet pictures "kept anti-Soviet feeling from getting even larger" in the United States (Culbert 41, 35). I have yet to find evidence that "Mission to Moscow" had any active influence on anyone, except to arouse a highly visible campaign of opposition by John Dewey and other anti-Soviet leftists,

who had a great time exposing its lies in the public press. When the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship staged a rally at Madison Square Garden to award a certificate of appreciation to "Mission to Moscow" and everybody

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*Koch depended on ordinary Americans' ignorance of history when he asserted his innocence about his communist ideals.*

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involved therewith, the principal speaker, the veteran communist sympathizer Corliss Lamont, denounced the enemies of the Soviet Union and listed "ten chief points in the present anti-Soviet campaign": "question of Finland . . . claim that Russia is persecuting religion . . . talk of a negotiated peace with Hitler," etc., etc., and "film version of 'Mission to Moscow'" (New York Times, May 21, 1943). Lamont didn't realize it, but "Mission to Moscow" was a powerful weapon *against* the cause it endorsed.

I once heard a preacher say, "The First Amendment gives everybody the right to prove he's a God-damned fool." That's the good news about America; the bad news is that America has all these God-damned fools. Yet they have seldom been so foolish as they were in the case of "Gabriel Over the White House" and "Mission to Moscow." □

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